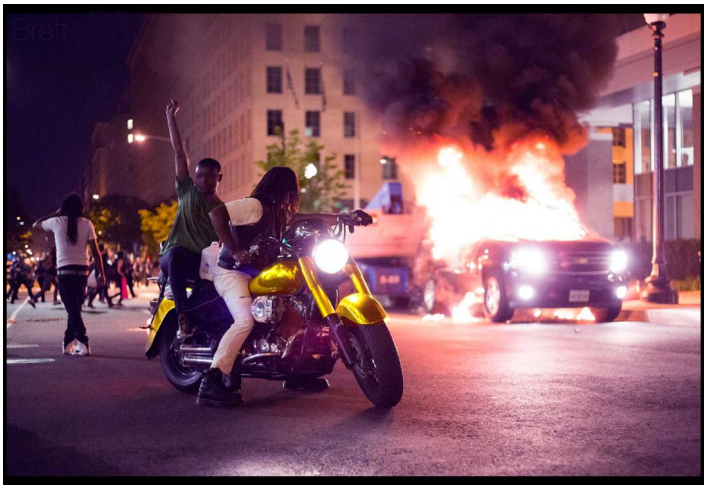
Big Brick Energy: A multi-city study of the 2020 George Floyd uprising



A critical overview and analysis from Unity and Struggle examining the George Floyd rebellion. A print edition and free PDF download are available from Common Notions.

Author: Unity & Struggle

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The entrance of Target is heavily graffitied with windows broken on Lake Street in Minneapolis, Minnesota. By Lorie Shaull (flickr)

1. Introduction

The 2020 George Floyd uprising was a major event by whatever measure you use. It deepened the generational Black revolt that began with Black Lives Matter in 2014. It marked the most profound challenge to racial capitalist rule since the 2008 financial crisis. It saw the National Guard deployed to multiple U.S. cities for the first time since the 1960s, and by one estimate, it was the costliest wave of civil unrest in the postwar period.[1] The uprising was rich with lessons, and it will shape a generation of us who moved in the streets.

But rigorous analysis of the uprising remains limited. Many of us haven't had time to reflect on it deeply: individuals and organizations have had to navigate state repression, sectarian infighting, interpersonal harm shaped by gender and race, and all kinds of tragedies stemming from the ongoing pandemic. More often, clusters of friends and comrades have drawn conclusions from local experience, and lefty commentators have produced think pieces that draw single themes out of the uprising, or spin it to fit their dogma.

Big Brick Energy takes a step beyond anecdotes and hot takes. For a year, members of Unity and Struggle studied the uprising by interviewing fifteen comrades in five cities, compiling news coverage from the same cities, and surveying official reports from local governments and police departments in seventeen cities nationwide. (For more on our methods, see Appendix A.) We drew out common dynamics across locations, identified tactics and strategies that the movement and the ruling class used, explored what worked or didn't, and highlighted important challenges and questions that a future uprising will likely encounter.

Generally, the uprising involved a common sequence of moments unfolding at different speeds and intensities, based on national trends and local turning points. When the rebellion erupted, it decisively defeated the police and paralyzed the local

ruling class, usually for several days. People launched waves of protests and looting, and improvised tactics from community self-defense groups to small autonomous zones. Different factions of the state (and white mobs or fascists) reacted in conflicting ways, but eventually settled on a mix of repression and cooptation that was able to contain the unrest. The movement was channeled into nonviolent protest and legislative reforms, which yielded much shallower gains than most of us hoped for.

Within this story there are many variations and nuances, and lessons to be learned. Below we draw out aspects of the uprising that carry implications for our tactics, strategy, and race politics.

Portland Police Bureau North Precinct Protest, August 23. By David Geitgey Sierralupe (flickr)

2. Tactical Findings

Between 15 and 26 million people participated in the uprising in nearly 550 cities and towns across the U.S.[2] But despite the vast range of experiences involved, a similar set of tactics seemed to emerge in most areas.

a. What mass spontaneity looked like

At the height of the uprising in late May and early June, crowds were able to evade and defeat police in the streets. Protesters preferred to avoid cops, keeping them at bay with small barricades and street fires. But if provoked, they would respond by throwing objects, de-arresting members of the crowd, forcing police to abandon vehicles and then destroying them, and looting. Images of burning police cars gave courage to other protesters, as did the sacking of the third precinct in Minneapolis on May 28th.

We found that self-identified leftists rarely led rallies or marches in the early days of the uprising. A social media post by a few activists, students, artists, or even an individual might be enough to draw a crowd, and once gathered, crowds often took their own initiative. Several comrades recalled the first time they saw self-appointed "organizers" leading with bullhorns, an unusual sight at first. Unaffiliated protesters, one comrade observed, might decide whether to follow a bullhorn based on the clarity of their message (focused on police, but with a critique of the system) and whether their proposed routes made sense and kept people safe.

Participants gravitated to roles that were intuitive and replicable. Cyclists rode ahead of marches to scout and block traffic. Individuals brought coolers to distribute snacks, or spray cans to tag slogans. Portland developed an especially rich tactical ecosystem during "front line" clashes at the Justice Center, after Trump deployed federal officers. Protests there started out using wet bandannas, but after encountering pepper bullets, flashbangs, and "triple chaser" CS gas canisters, they adopted gas masks and homemade shields. Riot Ribs, a grill-and-smoker team sustained by donations, provided free food and eye wash to nightly crowds.[3] Working alongside this mass activity, leftists played a key role sustaining specialized infrastructures such as street medics (see section 2b). More than groups pushing marches and slogans, people who provided material supports became the most credible forces on the ground: as one comrade said, "everyone trusted them."

Looting was also widespread, and developed a tactical mix of its own. Once police in a given city were swamped, communities could start looting in the power vacuum. Finding a target was often as simple as stumbling onto a crowd and joining in. Looting was covered on social media by leftists as well as members of the public. In the Bronx, people could follow the spotlights from police helicopters on foot and find the center of activity. In Philly, Minneapolis, and many other cities, looting caravans emerged: people drove toward reported looting, encountered others, and formed groups with dozens of vehicles that traveled between shopping plazas. Some teams developed a two-car method, with one driving ahead smashing storefronts, and another following behind liberating goods.

Where the uprising lasted longest and weakened the state the most, two tactics emerged which offer glimpses of dual power: occupations and community self-defense. These tactics suggest how future uprisings might unfold, while also revealing the broader strategic challenges they may encounter (see section 3).

Occupations ranged from homeless encampments demanding housing, to encampments led by progressive non-profits opposing police budgets, to relatively spontaneous autonomous zones which flourished where police fled. We saw three examples of the latter, all formed at sites of police violence: George Floyd Square in Minneapolis at the site where Floyd was murdered, CHOP/CHAZ (Capitol Hill Organized Protest / Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone) in Seattle at the east precinct, and the Rayshard Brooks Peace Center or occupied Wendy's in Atlanta where Brooks was killed shortly after Floyd.

All the occupations provided vibrant venues for food, teach-ins, performances, and public artwork. Unlike the general assemblies of Occupy or the indigenous-led community at Standing Rock, leadership in these occupations was largely informal, sometimes based on local or racial belonging. All faced right-wing attacks or rumors of them (and sometimes, exploratory visits from boogaloo boys) as well as violence that spilled over from conflicts in their surrounding communities. Authorities used shootings and deaths at the occupations to frame them as threats to public safety. However, our comrades believed these incidents often stemmed from preexisting community conflicts, of the sort that are unfortunately commonplace but usually go ignored.

Questions arose at all the autonomous zones over how decisions would be made, and by who–for example, in debates over whether to enter the abandoned police precinct in CHOP/CHAZ. Self-appointed security teams also posed challenges, sometimes mixing guns with drugs or alcohol, or taking their own decisions in conversation

with outside officials. In George Floyd Square, a security group named Agape collaborated with the city government to clear the streets to traffic. At the Wendy's in Atlanta, informal leadership came from Rayshard's family and community, and after rumors of white attacks and harassment by hostile reporters, non-Black people and reporters of all races were often denied entry. But when an eight-year-old Black girl named Secoria Turner was killed by a stray bullet during a conflict at a nearby checkpoint, the occupation began to collapse. Eventually all the autonomous zones ended through a mix of state repression and internal contradictions.

In Minneapolis, where police suffered the deepest defeats and abandoned the streets, community self-defense groups also sprang up across the city. These formed for a variety of reasons with a corresponding range of politics: to defend small businesses, address community problems and provide an alternative to the police, or maintain checkpoints and keep out the drug trade, which had been displaced from downtown into surrounding neighborhoods of color.[4] Some were all-Black, others all-white, and still others multiracial. Some were armed and others unarmed. While some defense groups were led by longtime activists, others were formed by punks, twelve-step sobriety groups, Iraq War veterans, or prominent members of the Black community. Fielding these groups simply required coordinating night walks or barricades, and if necessary bringing weapons. But sustaining them posed larger questions about how to address community issues, and how to relate to the 911 system and the city government.

Key Findings
- Uprisings involve a range of tactical settings, including mobile marches or looting, sustained "front line" clashes with police, and static barricades or encampments. We can take up a range of roles in these settings, always with the basic aim of defending each other from the state or fascists and enabling others to act.
- Rallies, signs, chants, and marshalled marches will be unimportant early in an uprising, but may become more common as time goes on. Leading these types of actions involves demonstrating a grasp of the cause and purpose of the movement, and proposing meaningful targets with reasonable risks.
- In future uprisings, movements may again take control of small liberated territories. These will likely become targets for reactionaries, as well as clearinghouses for social problems in our communities. The most pressing tactical challenges will be to protect them from attacks, resolve conflicts that unfold on site, and establish who can participate and how decisions will be made.
- Armed security or self-defense may be unavoidable given the threats uprisings face. To prevent state delegitimization and cooptation, and avoid internal violence, we will need to define acceptable conduct for these roles and to whom they should be accountable.

b. How the left contributed

At the height of the uprising, some leftists tried to organize with rallies, signs and bullhorns. These methods were largely lost in the spontaneous upsurge. But others sought out ways to materially support street action. Sometimes this involved simply distributing supplies, like lasers to disrupt police surveillance, or popularizing principles from international struggles, such as the "be like water" slogan from Hong Kong. In New York City, comrades encouraged defensive tactics such as encouraging people not to film one another or directing bike crews to protect marches. Those involved in previous waves of struggle were able to spot and spread emerging tactics quickly, thus fanning otherwise siloed practices across a crowd.

Leftists also maintained specialized infrastructures that others could use or join. Comrades in many cities provided the real-time location of marches or cops to audiences on Twitter or Telegram, helping crowds gather and avoid police lines. In Philly, organizers set up "safe houses" where friends could rest, check the news, and monitor police scanners. Preexisting bail funds in many cities were also flooded with donations and volunteers, growing into extensive organizations that bailed out arrestees, provided care packages, and gave legal support to those released. In Portland, street medics eventually even purchased their own ambulance, supplied by medical workers who expropriated materials on the job. Infrastructures like these allowed tired or injured protesters to support in other ways, and helped sustain the uprising over time. But they could also fall on an insular leftist core if they failed to to rapidly incorporate new participants.

Non-profits and vanguard parties leaned on familiar tactics such as die-ins, hot seat meetings with politicians, rallies with speakers, and photo-op marches. These actions could lead to dramatic scenes, as when Minneapolis mayor Jacob Frey was booed out of a mass meeting for opposing abolition. But they could also undercut people's capacity to confront the state. In Philly, the Party for Socialism and Liberation repeatedly led crowds away from police to defuse clashes, while scuffling with protesters to position their banners at the head of actions. Superfluous at first, these tactics gained traction as the uprising hit limits and the establishment began to steer events (see section 3).

Liberal organizations also put forward policy proposals that narrowed "abolish the police" to "defund" the police, entertaining conversation with the state to cut budgets by X percent, close X jail, hire emergency mental health counselors, and so on.[5] Leftists scrambled to pivot to this front in the wake of the riots and press for more far-reaching changes. In New York City, when VOCAL-NY convened an encampment at city hall appealing for $1 billion in defunding, participating abolitionists and socialists led their own assemblies to share experiences and call for deeper cuts. Making demands on the state was embraced by some protesters as a way to secure concrete gains from their actions. But it could also delegitimize street militancy and reinforce liberal narratives of progress.

Key Findings
- At the height of an uprising there is little need to organize typical rallies and marches. Instead we should work to popularize practical methods of struggle that can be taken up autonomously on a mass scale, and identify new ones as they emerge.
- Specialized infrastructures can provide "situational awareness" in the streets,

medical care, or support through the carceral system. They help to sustain uprisings, but can also reinforce the insularity of leftist groups. We should use these moments to welcome new people and grow our infrastructures in sustainable ways.
- When street action is high, establishment forces are drowned out. As street activity dies down, their watered-down framing of our goals and demands gains a hearing. This suggests we should generate mass demands when an uprising is at its height, and circulate them to establish a political pole if and when activity dies down.

c. How police responded

Official reports confirm what all of us saw: the numbers, geographic scope, combativeness, flexibility, and relative leaderlessness of the uprising overwhelmed almost every police department in the country for about a week (see Appendix B). By examining how police were routed, we can identify vulnerabilities which we can exploit in future uprisings.

Many police departments use one standard procedure for managing nonviolent protest and another for stopping criminality, and the uprising rendered both inapplicable. With no clear leaders, police lacked points of contact to coopt ahead of time. When they approached groups in the street to identify liaisons, they were met with hostility. When they tried to arrest individual rioters, they encountered a confusing mix of cameras, chants, and violent self-defense. When units were overrun or surrounded, SWAT units were sent in to extricate them. Vehicles left behind were looted and burned. (Crowds in Cleveland, Los Angeles, and many other cities looted handguns from police vehicles. In Chicago some people found long guns, and only took the ammunition.) By refusing the division between legitimate peaceful protests and illegitimate criminal acts, the uprising scrambled the police playbook.

Police also suffered operational failures due to the scale of the uprising. Many departments fielded their entire force, far beyond the specialized teams which normally manage protests, and combined units that rarely collaborated and which lacked crowd control training. With no plan to sustain 24/7 deployments, cops were driven to exhaustion in back-to-back shifts. When police called on state agencies or the National Guard for support, problems multiplied. Many agencies lacked standing agreements to share ammunition and equipment, which delayed the disbursement of tear gas and riot gear. They also lacked common use of force guidelines, leading to disjointed efforts that undermined one another.

Emergency command centers were set up to coordinate the repression, but these yielded problems of their own. Many jumbled the lines of communication to units on the street. Often commands failed to process intel into actionable items for different units, leading to subordinates getting flooded with irrelevant information, or else left in the dark. In Los Angeles, plainclothes officers normally pass intelligence to commanders on-site: now they fed intel to a citywide command center and it never filtered back to cops nearby. And with no protest leaders to liaise with, commands often relied on social media to learn of upcoming protests and identify suspects.[6] (Jurisdictions with preexisting fusion centers were more effective.)

Command centers also became liabilities in themselves. In Santa Monica, police set up a command center within the normal police headquarters, on which demonstrations then converged. A brick shattered the window of the room coordinating police dispatch, and the department was forced to relocate its entire dispatch operation to a neighboring city. Equipping officers in the field with food, water, and ammunition also required staging areas and supply lines, and deliveries on "golf cart" type vehicles. But since commands lacked "situational awareness" of where protests would occur, they often established these infrastructures in vulnerable locations. In many cities, marches or barricades snarled resupply and cut off officers from deploying to their assignments.

Police managed to adapt over the course of a few days and regain some tactical effectiveness. In Minneapolis, protesters marched on the fifth precinct the night after burning the third precinct, but by this time the state's Multi-Agency Command Center was operational, and a mix of local and state officers and National Guard troops were able to deter a hesitant crowd. In many cities, curfews allowed police to increase repression, and violently reimpose the distinction between sanctioned and illegitimate protest. In areas that had seen no looting, curfews also served a propaganda function by spreading fear that "the rioters were coming." As police gained the tactical upper hand, state and ruling class actors could begin experimenting with longer-term strategies to divide and coopt the uprising.

Key Findings
- To control movements, police depend upon making practical distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate protesters. We should deny them this ability, for example by refusing to communicate with police liaisons or preventing cops from arresting militant protesters.
- Between uprisings, we should fight to prevent or annul inter-agency agreements, fusion centers, or other law enforcement collaborations. This will hamper the state's ability to repress future unrest and criminalize communities of color.
- When uprisings are at their height, we should identify and publicize the location of police command centers, staging areas, and supply vehicles. Protesting at these spaces may keep the state tactically off-balance.

Protesters confront police in front of the Target at The Midway in St Paul, Minnesota. By Lorie Shaull (flickr)

3. Strategic Findings

a. How to tell things if are going to pop off

It is crucial to recognize when people start to move in a new way. This lets us accurately assess the moment's potentials and contribute to it meaningfully. But it can be hard to tell when something is about to erupt. We see injustices and protests

constantly: why should one police murder spark shit, and not the one before? We also learn to underestimate events. The more we see abuses pass unchallenged, the more retreats and defeats we suffer, the more inclined we are to view events cynically.

The early days of the uprising showed signs we can watch for, which might indicate that a larger rupture is emerging. Nearly all our comrades first realized 2020 was different when they saw people respond to ordinary crowd control with extraordinary combativeness. It was obvious when cars or precincts burned. But it was visible even at early demonstrations over Floyd's murder, or in the weeks prior. In New York City, hundreds of youth had participated in militant "FTP" protests over the preceding months, and comrades also noted a growing restlessness during the pandemic: people came to see themselves as essential and entitled to protections, but lost confidence in state services, and occasionally launched small workplace walkouts against unsafe conditions.

Several comrades argued that this new combativeness reflected new consciousness. Participants arrived to 2020 already clear that police were an enemy and that greater militancy was justified. In Minneapolis, this common sense built on earlier protests over police murders (Jamar Clark, Philando Castile): people had observed prior waves and absorbed their norms and expectations. As protests proliferated, they also sensed that distant actions were creating opportunities for them to act, and vice-versa. There was a sense of, "this is our chance."

Key Findings
- A rupture may be developing when people show extraordinary militancy against ordinary repression, display a new common sense built on prior precedents, and link their chances of success with others acting elsewhere.
- The best way to see this is to participate as observers (at least) in early events, and have relationships in many different communities. That way, we can gauge the popular mood, and guess at how widespread it may be.

b. How the state fractured

We defeated the state not just physically, but also *politically*. While cops in some areas were literally beaten back, more often they retreated to avoid messy clashes. Where the National Guard was deployed, it assumed a supportive / defensive posture and tried to avoid direct confrontations. Curfews facilitated repression, but they were also applied inconsistently, and triggered police violence which was then denounced by other officials. These contradictory responses reflected the paralysis of governors, mayors and city councils, who hesitated as they faced a no-win situation. If they allowed protests to continue they could suffer losses, but if they repressed protests wholesale they could spark blowback. In the space opened up by ruling class indecision and retreat, the movement was able to advance: controlling territory, expropriating goods, popularizing abolition.

Put on the defensive, different parts of the state improvised responses that clashed with one another, and the state itself began to fracture. Some politicians echoed Trump's threat to invoke the insurrection act, while others tried to position themselves as allies of the movement. Police departments in many cities had to stop posting on social media–not just because of trolls, but also, crucially, because their spin clashed with that of local liberal politicians. Some cities constrained the police even as they ordered them to crack down. In Portland, the city council banned CS gas, which hampered cops' ability to disperse crowds without exposing themselves to physical attacks. In Minneapolis, city council members promised to disband the police department.

At the same time, police rank-and-files went "off the leash." The most widespread vigilantism involved withdrawing patrols and unleashing bursts of exceptional violence. In Minneapolis, cops abandoned the streets and prowled in unmarked vans, firing pepper spray at random and snatching at least one person off the sidewalk. In New York, police held an anti-looting rally with allies in the Dominican community in Washington Heights, who chased suspected Floyd protesters through the streets with baseball bats. The NYPD also invited Homeland Security to deploy at several precincts without the mayor's knowledge (details of the agreement remain unknown), and transported arrestees across the city while stonewalling Legal Aid, effectively disappearing people in custody.[7]

All this suggests that when mass struggles divide the state, they can create opportunities to reclaim wealth and force concessions which would otherwise be difficult to achieve. It also reveals tendencies that may mature in future uprisings: official paralysis, wild swings in policy, and fascistic vigilantism from the cops.

Key Findings
- Our power doesn't only come from physical force in the streets (though this is important). It also stems from our ability to put the ruling class on the defensive, elicit divisions within the state and take advantage of the openings that result.
- Uprisings divide the state, causing factions to clash with one another and undermine official legitimacy and effectiveness. These fractures allow us to impose gains that otherwise would seem unlikely or impossible.
- Protracted uprisings will trigger independent action by the police ranks, such as "dirty war" tactics and coordination with federal agencies or fascists. We cannot rely on bourgeois norms or laws to hold back this repression.

c. How class layers and constituencies moved

By surveying the groups that made the uprising and the ways they moved, we can infer trends that may repeat themselves in future uprisings, or vary based on local conditions. The 2020 uprising was led by a mass vanguard of working class youth of color, but that is just the beginning of the story.

In every city we studied, just like in 2014, the most militant action was led by what comrades described as "Black proletarians" or "kids from the neighborhood": predominantly Black young people from poor and working class backgrounds, of all genders, with few apparent links to the organized left, who participated in protests

and escalated to fighting cops and looting. Sometimes they did so with the assistance of insurrectionary leftists, and sometimes not. In Center City Philadelphia, downtown Brooklyn, and Atlanta's Centennial Park, these grassroots leaders set it off.

An uprising resulted because different race and class constituencies united around this core, supporting Black struggle and linking it with their own grievances over policing and criminalization. Somali, Native and white youth showed out in Minneapolis, for example, while white street kids unleashed on cops and storefronts in Seattle. Local community and family politics may have shaped how different constituencies responded. One comrade guessed that proportionately fewer Latinx youth came out in Minneapolis, possibly due to close family supervision, while very few Hmong youth participated, maybe because of recent police recruitment in the Hmong community. (One cop who helped kill Floyd was Hmong, and ex-officer Derek Chauvin's now-ex-wife is also Hmong.)

Local economies shaped the proportions of lumpen "street" types, precarious working classes, or students and young professionals that came out. Gangs / street families participated: comrades saw flagged-up groups protesting, and some witnessed beefs with guns drawn or even shootings, though unity in action tended to prevail. White-collar professionals also participated in protests and even riots, including nonprofit workers, legal services staff, and teachers. One comrade used unemployment and stimulus checks to join in the uprising full-time, while another "logged out of work" for weeks. Generally, the "higher" the class status of a group, the more multiracial and non-Black it was, and the more self-consciously activist.

When looting spread beyond marches to outlying neighborhoods or counties, it allowed the uprising to leap in scale. This was almost always initiated by poor and working class Black or Latinx communities–the inner-city and suburban hood. Looting was often more intergenerational and communal than the protests. Young people might lead the smashing, while parents expropriated goods alongside their children. One Bronx comrade saw young men tossing goods "to abuelas in the second floor windows." Several comrades noted that the looting also had a logic: people prioritized parasitic businesses where working class paychecks and wealth disappear, such as liquor stores and pawn shops. The next priority tended to be luxury brands and chain stores, and then anything else.

As the uprising met repression and cooptation, different parts of this mass began to pull in different directions. Non-profit activists and party cadres used actions to demand reforms and recruit new members. In the process, they often contrasted themselves against, and delegitimized, street militancy: "this is how we make change, not by rioting." Street constituencies persisted longer with riots and looting (see section 4c) and sometimes turned to targeted actions. Some were explicitly illegal, like a year-long chain of daring ATM explosions in Philly. Others combined expropriation with political demands: notably, homeless people in several cities seized the opportunity to erect encampments in city parks and even an abandoned hotel. In Philly and Minneapolis, these camps lasted into the fall, as residents negotiated with officials for housing placements and policy changes, often in collaboration with leftists.[8]

Organized labor did not play a major role in the uprising, from what we saw. This may be because the Floyd uprising was relatively brief, whereas months-long uprisings like in Chile prompted unions to call national strikes or negotiate with the government. However, in some cases independent rank-and-file action compelled trade union bureaucracies to support the uprising. In New York City, a bus driver directed to transport arrestees for the NYPD refused to drive as comrades chanted outside, and ultimately forced TWU Local 100 to take a position against driving for the police. In Minneapolis, trade union militants got their unions to evict the National Guard from the St. Paul Labor Center, which had been used as a staging facility.[9]

Small businesspeople and homeowners flip-flopped based on who was winning. Sometimes these constituencies supported the uprising. In Minneapolis, many businesses protected themselves by inviting political artwork on their boarded-up windows, which visually transformed the city. A few opened as staging grounds for protests, or pivoted to selling food at George Floyd Square. Homeowners, especially in communities of color, might oppose looting but support protests. One Philly comrade saw a Black homeowner try to stop youth from "tearing up our own neighborhood," but once the rioting proved irreversible, join in confronting police. But at key turning points, these layers began to abstain from the uprising. In Minneapolis, uncontrolled fires caused deep unease among homeowners and businesses. Indiscriminate looting could also turn off communities that were closely identified with their small businesspeople. When Latinx immigrant businesses along Lake street were looted in Minneapolis, one comrade felt it symbolized to many that "this isn't for us."

Finally, white workers and petit-bourgeoisies also mobilized reactionary protests against the uprising. In Philly, white men turned out in Fishtown with bats and beers to defend small businesses, and later marched with weapons to defend their Christopher Columbus statue.[10] Counter-protests in these settings set off what one comrade called "a civil war" among whites. In several cities, organized fascists staged armed marches or patrols (in Atlanta, at the governor's mansion) with tacit support from the police. These actions could lead to violence as in Kenosha. But they also triggered political blowback in cities like Kalamazoo, Michigan, after police were shown on the news escorting fascist marchers.

Key Findings

- Uprisings gain momentum when different constituencies link their grievances to those of a leading group and join them in action. As different layers move, they contribute their own repertoires of protest, expanding the uprising's participation, geographic scope, and meaning. We should work to continually broaden the base of uprisings.
- Ruling class coercion and cooptation channels resistance into official politics, and re-imposes separation. At these turning points, professionalized activists and street

constituencies will tend to pursue different paths. To sustain an uprising, we have to help these struggles coordinate so that they mutually support each other, and so that they defend, not delegitimize, Black working class street militancy.
- Trade unions can be spurred to provide practical support to an uprising, if rank-and-file members participate in it and carry its concerns into union turf.
- Homeowners and small businesspeople can shape a community's view of an uprising, especially those who share ethnic ties with the surrounding working class.
In future uprisings, we will have to identify which petit-bourgeoisies may hold sway over working class constituencies, and consider if, and how, we should influence mass action to target some capitalist property while sparing others.

d. What internal limits the uprising ran into

Several weeks into the uprising, the movement started to ebb and struggle to find ways forward. Some communist thinkers call this an "internal limit": the point at which the methods, grievances and goals which enabled a movement to rise are no longer adequate to sustain it, and the movement must develop new aims and means, or else recede.

One set of limits were practical. In cities across the country, the scale of the uprising overwhelmed the police. But at a certain point, scale also posed challenges to reproducing and sustaining the uprising. In New York City, each action typically coordinates its own jail support at the one or two locations where arrestees are processed. But once actions began drawing hundreds of people, and arrestees were scattered across the city, this model proved difficult to scale up. Activists now had to improvise jail support citywide with few preexisting relationships. Small trusted networks struggled to track large numbers of arrestees, and jail support locations attracted pools of supporters without vetting or training them into volunteer roles.

Because Minneapolis saw the biggest unrest in the country, it revealed many challenges that large uprisings will face. There, stores were looted or shuttered across entire neighborhoods, creating massive food deserts overnight. Communities responded with an outpouring of mutual aid projects and by redistributing looted goods. But these efforts still struggled to supply food at scale. In the gap, churches and nonprofits stepped in–possibly with government funding–to distribute truckloads of free food across the city for months. Similarly, when police retreated from the streets, community self-defense groups mushroomed across the city, posing a potential dual power challenge to the local state. But it was difficult for them to learn of each other's existence, let alone coordinate. This left them vulnerable to paranoia and overtures from local politicians. One group called the Original Black Panthers convened a meeting of community defense groups, but this gathering did not produce a common organizational framework or orientation to politicians, police and so on. These experiences suggest the kinds of mass mobilization needed to sustain dual power: networks to distribute food and other supports (for example from surrounding agricultural areas) and a common platform for autonomous community defense.

A second set of limits were political. As the uprising encountered repression and critiques, participants had to justify why they were fighting and clarify what they wanted: what was all the unrest *for*? For some, a sense of direction also receded after the uprising's initial victories. After routing the cops and expropriating goods, participants began to ask what came next, and what lasting changes might make it easier for us to live and harder for them to rule. As one comrade put it, "we're marching across another bridge, but it's hard to see what we're building toward." At this point, in the absence of common goals and principles, politicians could experiment with cooptation and opportunists were free to launch self-appointed initiatives. Assemblies to work out these questions were noticeably absent: this showed in places like Seattle, where protesters occupied Cal Anderson Park in Capitol Hill, but struggled to develop a consensus about whether to enter the abandoned precinct, or what the building should be used for.

Participants also had to determine how to relate to one another as their differences became more salient. Among the organized left, tactical and strategic disagreements could lead to jockeying for leadership or call-outs. At the grassroots, beefs could lead to gunplay, which made spaces like the Wendy's in Atlanta isolated and dangerous. And generally, as constituencies highlighted the issues most important to them, the differing stakes of the movement for different participants became apparent, which could evoke distrust. One comrade, observing the disconnect between neighborhood onlookers and marching socialist teachers, and local skepticism toward multiracial rioting downtown, remarked "it felt like maybe you weren't sure who the enemy was anymore." These limits suggest the need for common purpose, goals, and principles to sustain an uprising, within which a variety of approaches can be tried out.

Key Findings
- As an uprising fractures and displaces the state, it will face the challenge of sustaining legal and medical supports, food supplies, and collective self-defense to reproduce itself. This is the emergence of dual power. We can prepare for these moments by cultivating collaborative relationships, common politics, and methods to involve new participants, at the scale of a metro area.
- At the height of an uprising, when new initiatives are forming daily, it is key to connect projects with one another and help them establish shared organizations and political orientations.
- Uprisings require the means to collectively discuss their own meaning and direction. This includes deciding how to respond to ruling class moves, situating varied concerns in a shared vision, and establishing common goals that will weaken the ruling class and strengthen our autonomy. We should create venues for these discussions, and offer our own ideas.

e. How the ruling class and state co-opted and contained

Repression only succeeded because the ruling class also persuaded some people that their concerns could be represented and addressed by the state. Politicians, especially establishment elites in communities of color, did this by casting militancy as

unacceptable and scolding young people from their communities. At the same time, they experimented with ways to gain a hearing from participants and be accepted as representatives of popular sentiments.

Politicians appeared alongside organized petit-bourgeoisies or other groups whose support might stand in for the whole community: business improvement districts, church congregations, local nonprofit organizations, celebrities, and so on. Several cities organized "cleanups" with small business owners. In Atlanta, Mayor Bottoms held a press conference with T.I. and Killer Mike to denounce riots. As one comrade observed, residents often accepted these moves because they came from organizations that were well known on a neighborhood level. Where these didn't exist, politicians also offered wages to lumpen elements to conjure new partners: Agape, the group of former Vice Lords that cleared George Floyd Square to traffic, were granted contracts with the city to run violence interruption and youth programs.

Politicians also proposed reforms, which shifted control over the pace of events from the streets to city councils, and bought time for militancy to ebb. "Defund" budgets were introduced and steadily watered down into early July. Legislation limiting police tactics, or establishing civilian oversight boards, was introduced in the fall. These bills dragged on for months as they were debated, studied, and amended in various hearings. The effect was to produce an image of democratic consultation, in which militancy could recede and conservative voices could rise to the surface, for example in concerns over gun violence. A Minneapolis charter amendment to disband the police was defeated this way by referendum, in November 2021. For militant holdouts, like self-defense groups in Minneapolis or the Wendy's occupation in Atlanta, politicians negotiated privately, stringing participants along out of the public eye. Officials also peppered in symbolic changes, like removing statues and appointing women of color police chiefs.

Nonprofits played a key role in facilitating this process. While some were directly contracted with city governments, others simply fell into familiar repertoires of using "street heat" to achieve incremental legislative change. For example, Black Visions in Minneapolis led the initial "hot seat" meetings that forced the city council to commit to disband the police, feeding into the failed yearlong charter amendment fight. To conduct these campaigns, nonprofits often had to undermine the militancy which might otherwise have helped force meaningful concessions. They usually did so by framing themselves as community representatives and casting militants as outsiders endangering locals. At VOCAL-NY's city hall encampment in New York City, participants took to the streets when a merely symbolic defund budget was passed. But VOCAL staffers convinced the crowd to disperse, claiming people would be "disrespecting Black women" if they refused to leave. Nearly every comrade had a similar story of "peace policing" from nonprofit staff or members.

Key Findings
- To keep a law-and-order coalition from forming, it is important to prevent local petit-bourgeoisies and politicians from standing in for, and securing the consent of, their surrounding communities. This highlights the need for autonomous left organizations in poor and working class communities of color, which are well-known locally, to challenge official discourse at key moments.
- Reforms demobilize movements by controlling the pace of events and setting the terms of popular participation. This suggests we are more likely to win gains when movements take the initiative, impose ticking clocks on the state, and facilitate mass democratic participation.
- Nonprofits gain leverage by acting as representatives for communities, and pressuring politicians while maintaining working relationships with them. By contrast, we should help people to formulate and express their demands directly, and overturn clientelist relationships with elites.

George Floyd protests on their ninth day in Miami. By Mike Shaheen (flickr)

4. Race Politics Findings

The George Floyd uprising was both a continuation and a leap forward in the Black-led resistance to police and racist violence over the past fifteen years.

The 2009 Oscar Grant rebellion in Oakland prefigured many of the features seen in 2020, from youth riots challenging Black political elites to the counterinsurgency role played by non-profits. Nonviolent protests against racist murder then reached a national scale in 2012 after the killing of Trayvon Martin. When Michael Brown's murder in Ferguson sparked the Black Lives Matter movement in 2014, protests leapt nationwide and globally, and also unleashed riots in U.S. cities such as Baltimore, though these remained outliers. The 2020 uprising again became nationwide and global, from protests in France to #EndSARS in Nigeria.[11] However, in this case rioting in the U.S. was also immediate and widespread.

We believe this trend reflects an ever deeper and more prevalent sense of the illegitimacy of the state, the rootedness of racism in American society, and the scale of resistance needed to change it. Black struggle is evolving, and posing more profound challenges to capital on larger scales. The latest moment in 2020 suggests how multiracial unity may emerge in practice and the vulnerabilities it will have to confront, as well as the forms that Black autonomy may take and the challenges it faces in turn.

a. What made multiracial unity possible

The early days of the uprising were characterized by broad multiracial unity in action. Part of this is due to the sudden collapse of hegemony: with police and political elites unable to criminalize and divide protesters, and the movement united against a common enemy, the streets became a testing ground for new forms of racial solidarity.

These experiments led to funny moments. One comrade recalled that as a multiracial

crowd smashed windows at the CNN Center in Atlanta, a white protester joined in, and participants began chanting "go white boy, go white boy" in support. During looting in Philadelphia, a white comrade was approached by various Black protesters, one declaring "we're all n––s tonight!" and another announcing "okay all lives matter." This was more fluid than in many previous marches, where participants might be morally encouraged to take up distinct roles and risk levels according to their racial position ("white folks to the front / sides"). At the height of the uprising, solidarity was instead informed by mutual risks in illegal actions: those willing to fight police and loot property shared in a new kind of belonging, in which racial positions could be simultaneously recognized and commonality across them celebrated.

Multiracial unity may have also built on precedents from daily life. A Minneapolis comrade guessed that solidarity among youth in the streets may have built on young peoples' prior collaboration in schools and neighborhoods, such as the soccer clubs that bring together Somali and Mexican youth on the city's south side. People's experience in multiracial settings surely shaped how they could imagine uniting in the streets–and conversely, where they doubted solidarity would last.

Key Findings
- Uprisings create spaces where we can simultaneously recognize our different racial positions and practice transcending them. A key condition for this is that we take united action against racial capitalism and share the risks and responsibilities of doing so, including in illegal actions against police or property.

b. How racial division re-emerged

As powerful as it was, multiracial unity was also fragile. Once the ruling class regained its footing, political elites frequently used the specter of the white outside agitator (sometimes described as an anarchist, sometimes a fascist) to cast militancy as a threat to communities of color. Nonprofits often echoed this rhetoric in order to frame themselves as the true representatives of communities of color who could deliver real change. Several comrades observed that this discourse distorted the way people understood their own uprising, for example coming to believe the riots were started by white provocateurs.

These maneuvers leveraged real distrust about white intentions within the uprising. Communities of color have a rational skepticism of white reliability and deep experience with state repression based on generations under white supremacy. In Brooklyn, one Black comrade noted that her neighbors feared police would get angry at white protesters downtown and take out their aggression on the community after curfew. And in many cities, white violence was also a tangible threat. Once fascists or white mobs were on the move or rumored to be, it was often simply not worth the risk to have white people around.

Non-Black liberals, for their part, were quick to fall back on legal, nonviolent protest as the state cracked down, abandoning Black militants to fight on their own (see section 4c). Eager to position themselves as allies of Black people, they tailed nonprofits calling reforms and denouncing lawbreaking. White leftists also hesitated to put forward ideas about what to do, sometimes ceding space to reformists or opportunists. All these dynamics point to the importance of autonomous revolutionary groups in communities of color, who are best positioned to lead militant action against white supremacists and reformists of color, and shape the terms of white solidarity.

Key Findings
- The ruling class maintains its rule not only by stoking white supremacist violence, but also by cultivating white liberal support for reformist elites of color, and a sense of weakness and isolation among the Black working class. These dynamics rest on real experiences, and will take sustained mass practice to shift.
- Future uprisings may be strengthened by building a small but consistent tendency of non-Black support for Black militancy, and developing autonomous revolutionary organizations in communities of color which can fight on our own terms.

c. Double-bump protests as race autonomy

The erosion of multiracial unity did not mean militancy stopped. Instead, the spirit of the uprising continued in a more autonomous manner, led by Black working class and lumpen layers, with non-Black supporters fewer or more distant, and facing more repression by the police. We saw this clearly in what we call "double-bump protests": predominantly Black resistance that popped off after the initial uprising was on the decline.

While the initial round of rioting around the country came in response to Minneapolis, a number of the cities we studied saw a second round of protests (a double bump) caused by local police murders. In Atlanta, police killed Rayshard Brooks three weeks after Floyd, sparking the Wendy's occupation. In Minneapolis in late August, Eddie Sole killed himself while fleeing from Minneapolis police, and was initially understood to have been shot by the cops, which triggered renewed looting. In Philly in October, police killed Walter Wallace, triggering a second round of riots and looting.

In these protests most participants were Black, since the majority of non-Black protesters had fallen back on traditional forms of protest. The participants themselves also tended to be more suspect of non-Black participation. In Atlanta, non-Black people were sometimes asked to leave the Wendy's occupation. In Philly, whites who came to watch looting without participating might be chased out or punched. The sense of isolation and suspicion of non-Black participants was not without justification. Local news coverage of the Wendy's occupation in Atlanta, for example, was consistently racist and classist, and there were rumors of white racist attacks in the area. In Philly, police were much more violent to these protests than in May, seeking revenge for their earlier defeats and to stamp out any remaining Black resistance.

Despite the limitations of the double-bump protests, they posed an important challenge to both white reaction and elites of color, and highlight the shape that autonomous Black struggle may take in future uprisings. Spaces like the Wendy's in Atlanta reveal questions that all Black struggles are compelled to resolve when fighting independently: how to address conflicts within the community, how to respond to overtures or scolding from the Black elite, and how to relate to non-Black people who want to stand in solidarity.

Double-bump protests also highlight the need for non-Black leftists to find ways of supporting Black autonomy when not participating directly in its spaces. One comrade in Philly noted that nonviolent protesters simply blocking police from approaching looters was a small yet tangible way to support street militancy. Another comrade pointed to homeless protest encampments in several cities–another kind of action that emerged as the uprising declined–as a venue where leftists could provide sustained support to predominantly Black unhoused organizers.

Key Findings
- After an uprising peaks, spontaneous multiracial unity may give way to liberal backsliding, and double-bump protests in communities of color against ongoing injustices.
- In double-bump moments, those of us organizing autonomously in Black working class communities should define what kinds of alliances with non-Black leftists are strategic, while also moving independent of the Black elite. Non-Black leftists should find ways to materially support Black working class militancy, even as our activities may become more distinct or our organizations separate.

A Demonstrator Standing On A Police Car. (Seattle, Washington) By Hongao Xu (flickr)

5. Conclusion

Two years after 2020, many wonder what has changed. Liberals are now disavowing "defund" rhetoric while the right redoubles its war on "wokeness." "Law and order" administrations are repackaging mental health crises and community violence as crime panics, and rolling back criminal justice reforms at the urging of local capitalists. The uprising didn't produce the change many of us had hoped. However, it did profoundly shift the political terrain in which subsequent struggles will take place. Big ruptures often tend to disperse into an array of smaller fights over local concerns, like a river splitting into streams. By locating these streams, we can find places to secure small but lasting gains–and lay the foundation for the next uprising.

The biggest demands from the uprising were not achieved. Only a few cities cut police budgets and funded social programs. The cuts hovered in the 1-2% range, often through budgetary tricks like hiring freezes, and all have been reversed. But criminal justice reforms accelerated: cities routed mental health calls to alternate services, created new police oversight boards, elected progressive district attorneys, and limited or banned chokeholds, street stops, or no-knock raids. Many police departments also suffered waves of resignations and early retirements. Some had to create "officer wellness" programs to deal with widespread depression, and operate at reduced force. Our findings suggest that we need autonomous power to check ruling class regroupment, or else these gains will be implemented on the terms of elites, and quickly rolled back.

Beyond policy, the uprising's impacts continue to be felt culturally and institutionally. In a matter of weeks, "abolition" went from a leftist niche to mainstream discourse, and big corporate firms rushed to embrace "racial justice" rhetoric. Universities and city agencies launched innumerable justice initiatives, reshaping their internal governance. As students returned to in-person classes, many led walkouts against racist and sexist administrators or bullying. The ongoing wave of worker organizing may be influenced by workers' experiences in 2020, including the uprising. In Minneapolis, people in the hip-hop and metal scenes, and even the stand-up comedy scene, forced reckonings over racism, patriarchy and homophobia. Pride celebrations in several cities kicked out police, sparking clashes between cops and leftist Pride contingents.[12] Where we enjoy strategic, tactical, and numerical advantages in these settings, we can fight to consolidate lasting gains.

As we do so, we can also start to apply the tactical, strategic, and racial lessons of 2020. By popularizing militant tactics, maintaining infrastructures to sustain resistance, and hampering law enforcement's ability to coordinate, we set ourselves up for tactical successes. By keeping factions of the state at odds, cultivating city-wide collaborations across different communities and class layers, and defending the legitimacy of Black street militancy, we lay the basis for strategic momentum. And by practicing multiracial solidarity that shares in risks and lasting commitments, and building autonomous left organizations in communities of color, we prepare the ground for principled unity against racial capitalism.

We can apply these lessons now, in miniature or in outline. By doing so, we make it more likely that another uprising will emerge in the future, that we will be able to overcome internal and external limits, and that we will win.

BLM at Monroe Park, Eugene, Oregon. June 11, 2020. By David Geitgey Sierralupe (flickr)

Appendix A: Methods

Big Brick Energy was led by a team of three authors from Unity and Struggle, with help from other members who coordinated interviews, gave feedback, and sometimes participated as interviewees themselves. Over twelve months, we interviewed fifteen comrades in five cities (New York, Philly, Atlanta, Minneapolis, Portland). One of us also wound up having dinner with a Seattle comrade whose stories we worked in afterward. Interviewees ranged from class struggle anarchists to insurrectionary

communists, to abolitionists in the Democratic Socialists of America. They spanned Gen X to Gen Z, but were mostly millennials with political experience over the last ten or fifteen years. Six were Black, six white, and the remainder Latinx and Asian (with some afro-latinx comrades in there shaking up the categories). Almost two-thirds were women or non-men.

At the start of our inquiry, riffing on conversations in Unity and Struggle, we brainstormed a set of questions about the uprising focused mostly on tactics and specialized roles in the street. When we invited comrades to speak with us, we shared a writeup with our goals and questions for feedback. The Minneapolis comrades especially encouraged us to focus more on strategic concerns, and we refined our questions. We then held interviews (sometimes individual, sometimes in small groups) and used open-ended questions to encourange comrades to tell the story of the uprising as it was meaningful to them. This allowed topics to emerge that might not fit our preconceived ideas. We took anonymized hand notes and compiled them on an encrypted drive.

We supplemented the interviews by reconstructing a timeline of news coverage in each city. This allowed us to confirm names and dates, and supplement parts of comrades' memories that were blurry. (Many could describe the first days of the uprising with play-by-play detail, but the months afterward were told in cliff notes.) We also read twenty-one official reports from seventeen cities, produced by police departments and other city agencies. These showed us the uprising from our enemy's point of view, and revealed failures and weaknesses that weren't visible from the streets.

Finally, we reflected on our materials. First, we identified patterns that emerged organically from comrades' accounts, which we didn't expect going in. Second, we went through and answered the specific questions we had posed at the outset. Third, we circulated a draft among Unity and Struggle and the participants, discussing it in a feedback session before finalizing a version for public release.

Big Brick Energy still has gaps. Following our social-political networks yielded interviews in large cities on the eastern seaboard, plus a few in the upper midwest or deep south, while we struggled to connect with the west coast and southwest. We also lacked interviews in smaller cities like Kenosha or Louisville, or the suburban "hinterlands" that some argue are key sites of struggle in the U.S. today. Missing Louisville was particularly unfortunate, because we weren't able to get a closeup account of organizing around Breonna Taylor's murder, and the armed demonstrations led by the Not Fucking Around Coalition. We encourage comrades from these areas to see what in this inquiry fits their experience or doesn't, and write up further summations.

We believe inquiries should become a feature of the revolutionary movement. The ruling class has think tanks and universities to help it rule: we have to think for ourselves, drawing lessons and posing questions for future struggles. Being better organized will help. By cultivating collaborative relationships across regions and struggles, we will be able to more rapidly construct a representative picture of a political moment. By growing larger organizations, some of us will be able to hit the streets and recover while others start compiling information. We encourage comrades to link up for this type of work in the future.

Appendix B: Official Reports

21CP Solutions, *After-Action Recommendations for the Raleigh Police Department* (November 2020)

Citizen Review Committee, *Portland Protests 2020*

City Comptroller, *Independent Investigation into the City of Philadelphia's Response to Civil Unrest* (January 2021)

City of Cleveland, *May 30 Civil Unrest After-Action Review*

City of Kalamazoo, *Independent Review of Kalamazoo Department of Public Safety in Two 2020 Critical Incidents* (August 2021)

City of La Mesa, *An Independent After-Action Report for the Civil Unrest on May 30, 2020* (January 2021)

City of Santa Monica, *Independent After Action and Evaluation Regarding the Events Leading to, During, and Following May 31, 2020* (May 2021)

Dallas Police Department, *After Action Report*

Human Rights Watch, *"Kettling" Protesters in the Bronx* (September 30, 2020)

Independent Council, *An Independent Examination of the Los Angeles Police Department 2020 Protest Response*

Independent Council, *Report to the Huntsville Police Citizens Advisory Council* (April 2021)

Independent Review Panel, *Final Report Regarding the Reponse of the Indiana Metropolitan Police Department*

John Glenn College of Public Affairs, Ohio State University, *Research Evaluation of the City of Columbus' Response to the 2020 Summer Protests*

Los Angeles Police Department, *Safe LA Civil Unrest After Action Report*

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New York City Department of Investigation, *Investigation into NYPD Response to the George Floyd Protests* (*December 2020*)

Office of Inspector General, *Report on Chicago's Response to George Floyd Protests and Unrest (February 2021)*

Office of the Independent Monitor, *The Police Response to the 2020 George Floyd Protests in Denver*

Portland Police Bureau, *2020 Portland Civil Unrest After Action and Recommendations*

Seattle Office of the Inspector General, *Sentinel Event Review of Police Response to 2020 Protests in Seattle*

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2020s, Black Lives Matter movement, riots, United States, race, George Floyd protests

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